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INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2679
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 5089
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0819
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 1348

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: POLICE SHOOT AND KILL SIX IN ANDHRA PRADESH LAND PROTESTS

REF: KOLKATA 095

11. (U) SUMMARY: On July 28, police shot and killed six villagers in Mudigonda in the Khammam district of Andhra Pradesh after a political protest demanding free land for the poor turned violent. Two other protesters were killed in separate incidents with the police. The protest, sponsored by the Left parties -- the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M) -- had been ongoing since May. According to media reports, the police fired after protesters began pelting them with rocks. Calls for the resignation of Chief Minister YSR Reddy in the wake of the incident are likely to go unheeded. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) According to media reports, Andhra Pradesh's Left parties had been agitating for the "distribution of agricultural land to the landless and house sites for the homeless" since May. Tensions ratcheted up as time went on. On July 22, two Left party leaders went on an indefinite hunger strike. They then called for a protest at the Hyderabad district collector's office on July 26. The police used water canons, teargas, and lathi charges to disperse the July 26 protest, but they did not resort to shooting.

13. (U) After the July 26 protest in Hyderabad, the Left parties called for a statewide strike on July 28. For the first time, the state's other opposition parties -- the TDP, TRS, and BJP -- joined in the protest, calling on their supporters to honor the planned July 28 statewide strike. On July 28 in Mudigonda, agitators blocked the road, bringing traffic to a standstill. When police reinforcements arrived and tried to break the blockade protesters began throwing stones at them, according to media reports. Additional Superintendent of Police Ramesh Babu ordered the police to fire, killing six and injuring eight protestors. Twelve police officers were reportedly injured. Protest organizers said the police fired without warning. They also accused the police of using self-loading rifles, which are issued to anti-terrorism units and not intended for use against civilians. (NOTE: Khammam district, where Mudigonda is located, is an area with significant Maoist activity. As such, the police there likely did have self-loading rifles. END NOTE.)

14. (U) Opposition party leaders from across the board predictably called for Congress party Chief Minister YSR Reddy's resignation. For the families of the protesters killed by the police, the Chief Minister announced USD 12,500 compensation, a house, and a government job for one member of the family. The seriously injured would get USD 1,250 and those treated as out-patients USD 250, in addition to free medical care. The Chief Minister also announced a judicial inquiry into the firing.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: "The whole incident was politically motivated," said a media contact. He explained that the Left parties are looking to build up their base in Andhra Pradesh. The TDP, no longer allied with the BJP's National Democratic Alliance, needs a

new partner to help it defeat Congress in the 2009 elections. The TDP had, in fact, stalled the land distribution program when it was in power. But with it now looking to the prospect of aligning with the Left parties in the next statewide elections it has decided to join hands with the Left parties on the issue. The tragic shooting incident gives the TDP and the Left parties more ammunition against YSR Reddy's Congress government. That said, a well-placed Congress party Member of the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly dismissed the idea that Chief Minister Reddy should resign. He pointedly mentioned that Congress did not push for the ousting of West Bengal CPI-M Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya after the March incident in Nandigram where police killed 14 people (reftel). END COMMENT.

KAPLAN